

Choice Literature.

HEATHER BELLEN.

A MODERN HIGHLAND STORY.

CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

It was no uncommon thing for Archibald Graham to be absent whole nights from his home. There need be no secret as to the way in which for the most part he spent his time on these occasions. There were at least half a dozen houses in the glen where he was a frequent, and, at least to some of the inmates, a welcome evening visitor. Old folks might at times shake their heads, but among the younger and more thoughtless he was a prime favourite. None so willing and able as he to enliven conversation with his wit; none so ready to try a little game of flattery and flirtation with the pretty daughter of a crofter; none to match him in the singing of a merry song; none to rival him in the use even of their own Highland pipes. Accomplishments such as these helped to beguile, for him and for others, any long winter's evening. If the night were stormy, a rendezvous at some distance, and the merry making prolonged beyond the hour of rest at the farm, a bed was found for him in the "best room" till the morning broke. There were special occasions on which his presence and company were greatly in request. No marriage party in the glen was complete without Archie Graham and his pipes. Those who invited him were flattered by his presence and delighted by his music and song, while to himself such gatherings were at least a fair substitute for the gay scenes of city life. On most of the occasions of his absence from home during night, his sisters knew or found out where he had been; and though they thought his conduct unworthy, and such as did not become either his station or prospects, they might have borne with and condoned it. But there was something more. In some cases no hint reached the sisters, nor did enquiry elicit any information where he had been, or how employed, from the time when he left home in the evening till his return on the following morning. No wonder they were anxious and troubled; but what could they do? Their father alone could put any check upon Archibald, and he seemed quite indifferent. He simply regarded these escapades as harmless "larks" on the part of his son, or at worst not a bad safety valve against more doubtful adventures still. Once or twice he had remonstrated with Archibald because of his easy familiarity with a class so much beneath him in station; but he consoled himself for the failure of his appeal by hoping that, by and by, his son would grow out of these connections, and take his proper place in society and the community.

This was the young man who, in the Bay of the Boulders, sought and won, under circumstances so peculiar, the hand of Carrie Craig. They had frequent met each other in London, and there young Graham had paid her frequent and marked attentions. At what time their union could be realized, and what future it might bring them, it were premature to say. The Colonel was not likely to refuse his consent; for Mr. Graham's wealth was very much greater than his own, so that his daughter would at least be assured of every outward comfort and luxury.

Florence, the younger daughter of the farmer, still claims our notice. She was the sunlight of his home. Wherever she went, whatever she did, sweetness and joy were her very atmosphere. This was not due so much either to the finely-chiselled lines of her bright face, or the tender gracefulness of her airy form; but rather, and above all, to the irresistible charm of an utterly unselfish nature. She lived for others, not for herself; she thought of others, not of herself. She was never weary in the performance of kind and loving deeds; yet when she herself was the object of similar attentions, she received them with unfeigned surprise and gratitude, as if it were wonderful that any one should think of her. This utter forgetfulness and abnegation of self were in Florence Graham no fruit of high morality alone (however worthy of admiration they would in that case have been); they were the outcome of deep and strong religious principle. From her earliest days she had loved the ways of God; and His grace, taking possession of her nature in its bloom, had built up in her a pure and noble character. The pious solicitude of a godly nurse, to whose care on the death of her mother she had been entrusted, was by God's blessing largely instrumental in making her what she was. At the Free Church school of Glenartan, she received the first elements of a sound and solid education; and there also her acquaintance with Roderick McKay began. Though rivals in their class (for she was the most formidable competitor he had) they were ever the best of friends; and on the way home from school he was her frequent defender from the rudeness of wild and unmannerly boys. As years passed on, their mutual friendship gradually ripened, although they were scarcely aware of it, into more tender attachment. Even when Florence was sent for several years to a boarding school in Edinburgh, they met on her return at holiday times; and though there was very naturally a growing restraint in their intercourse, yet their interest one in the other was in no way diminished or impaired. All this time not a word escaped either of them which could properly be construed into an expression of tender feeling, yet they understood each other well. Bitter, indeed, was the crisis in their relations one to another, of which Miss Morrison told her brother on his return from the Assembly.

A noble match for Florence was one prime end of his ambition. When therefore he began to suspect—long after others had known it—the mutual regard which had grown up, as they themselves grew, between her and young McKay, his disappointment and anger amounted almost to fury. A catechist's son, and never likely at best to be more than a poor and humble Free Church minister, he must never dare to be a suitor for Florence's hand! Mr. Graham was determined no time should be lost; he would nip this danger in the bud.

One evening, after tea, he ordered Florence to follow him to his room. She obeyed with but the faintest pre-sentiment of the meaning of the summons.

"Take a chair," said her father, in a tone which, stern though she knew him to be, was new and painful to Florrie.

"I want to speak to you, Florence," began her father, "and you know my nature. I cannot go about the bush. What are your relations to Roderick McKay?"

The girl could not reply. She only covered her down-cast face with her hands to check or screen the gathering tears.

"Let me help you then," said Mr. Graham, determined to push his examination to a point at once. "Has he ever spoken to you of love?"

"Never, father," was all that she could utter, but her voice was firm.

"Never!" replied her father incredulously. "Is that absolutely true?"

"He has never once breathed such a thing to me."

Mr. Graham had never doubted, or had occasion to doubt, his daughter's word; and he could not now. Yet he was not satisfied.

"So far well. But I want something more, and you must not trifle with me, Florrie. Do you love him?"

A storm of bewildered feelings, in broken waves, passed over poor Florrie at the words. She felt as if caught up and away into some world where all was shadowy and strange to her. She could only answer, as her quivering lips would allow—

"Really, father, I cannot tell."

It was true. She had never even attempted to analyze her feelings toward the young student. She had been unconscious in great measure of the secret development of her affections. Whatever she felt, she could not tell what it was to love. She could only disclaim what she was unable to avow.

Her father could not be entirely insensible to the distress she manifested. He had at least the satisfaction of feeling assured that he was yet in time. It only remained to him to push the advantage home. He did so in firm but milder tones.

"Listen to me, Florrie; this must come to an end. McKay shall never be either friend or lover to you. Of that I am resolved. You must shun his company; and if at any time you meet when you cannot help it, you must never allow him to whisper one tender word in your ear. Do you promise?"

"I do," said the girl, crushed, she could not tell why, beneath the blow.

She could almost there and then have recalled her previous words, and openly avowed a tender attachment to McKay. But she had not coolness for so bold and critical a step. She could only grieve and weep.

"Now you may go," said her father. "Stay, I had better say that I mean to write McKay to a like effect. You and he must be a little more than strangers for the future. I hope better things are in store—for you, I mean."

So saying, he waved his daughter away. Hurrying to her own room, she flung herself on a chair by her bedside, and buried her burning cheeks in the coverlet. There she wept out her pent-up feelings in a "good cry." It was her first sharp sorrow; but she might yet survive it. Time would tell.

CHAPTER VII.—THE SMUGGLERS.

Some nine months elapsed between the events already described, and those we have now to relate.

One cold dark rainy night in March, 1867, Archibald Graham left home as usual after the evening meal. His father, engrossed in reading, scarcely noticed his departure; his sisters knew nothing of his intended movements. But, turning a thick blue coat up to his chin, he quitted the house without a word; Martha only remarked in a whisper to her sister that he had left his pipes at home. Speeding up the glen for a little way, he took the road which led across the river, and skirted the grounds of the shooting lodge. Thinking of some one far away who might be there when the summer came, he ascended the hillside to a crofter's house where a single small window emitted faint light from within. He did not need to announce his arrival, for two men were waiting for him in the dim shadow of the gable. Brief greetings were exchanged; and then the little group, leaping a turf dyke behind the house, rapidly mounted the hill together. They were bent on a night of smuggling. The scene of their intended operations was well chosen. Above a hollow curve in the mountain side lay a deep dark corrie, where great masses of rock, rent from the serrated ridges of the sky line, almost blocked the bed of a roaring stream. It was a spot where, in ordinary circumstances, no human foot needed, or would care to tread. Even the shepherd, looking for wanderers from his flock, passed it by beneath, for he knew that in its wild and desolate shade there was scarce a blade of grass on which a sheep might feed. When Graham and his companions, after a tedious and toilsome ascent, reached the rendezvous, they found that two confederates had arrived before them, and were already at work. In a little hollow space by the side of the burn, enclosed by four or five great boulders, stood the varied apparatus for their lawless labours. Still and worm and condenser were in full working order; and the wash, already prepared from the raw grain for the process of distillation, stood in a great vessel near the fire. The new comers were at once offered a dram, the produce, no doubt, of former operations; and in a short time all were busily engaged. One of the most skillful and experienced carefully watched the fire, in order to maintain the delicate shade of temperature required in the process. It is needless to detail the various steps and stages of the art, as practised in rude form by these men; we shall rather listen to their rough and whispered talk. English, out of compliment to young Graham, was the language professedly spoken—whether the Queen's English or no, we leave others to judge. In by-talk among themselves, however, they always reverted to their native Gaelic.

"Hey, Angus, stuff something in between the rocks there,"

said the oldest man of the band; "we'll be best to hide our light in a bushel to noo whatever."

"What for will I be doing that?" said the young man addressed, who lay smoking near the fire. "Ye'll no be feared for ta gaygers ta night, to be sure. They'll be takkin' mair care o' their saft banes nor to come here in ta wind and ta rain, whatever."

"Haud ye tongue, man," replied the other. "They'll no be sic fools as ye'll be takkin' them for. They ken better nor you, a'm thinkin', that a bad night for them 'ill no be a bad night for oor wark."

"What makes you speak that way to-night, guidman?" said Graham. "It doesn't fit an old hand like you. What are you afraid of?"

"Oh nossing, nossing," said the old man, whose name was Donald. He spoke low and quickly, as if half-ashamed of his words. "But hersel would be hearing somesing yesterday before to-day."

"What did you hear?"

"Oh nossing, nossing," said Donald, rising at the same moment to lift a fallen peat, and set some more around the glowing fire.

Graham started to his feet, and seizing him by the shoulders, gave the old man a rude shaking, at the same time saying—

"Speak out, you old fool; if there's anything up, I have more to lose than you."

"Tak' anither drap o' this," said one of the men, filling for Graham a glass he was in the act of preparing for his own use. "It's a cauld night, and ta sperit will be ryal guid for ta nerves."

The young man winced under the implied taunt, and dashed the glass in fragments to the ground. Then advancing till their faces were within a few inches of each other, he said angrily—

"Let me and my nerves alone. They have proved better than yours many a time. I must have out of old Donald here what he knows."

"Well," replied that worthy at last, "she'll jist tell ye. It was Widow Macrae at ta Inn that'll be hearing daft Willie tell yin o' ta gaygers that he'll see a licht here last night."

"Where did he see that foun?" asked Graham.

"Is it where from did he'll see it? He'll be trayvelling over from Glen Lorg, an' he'll see it from ta croon o' ta hill abuve yer father's."

"Never!" cried Graham uneasily. "Perhaps he did, after all. There's not more than ten square yards in all the glen where this fire could be seen; but the ten square yards are just where you say. I have tried it."

"And there will be more, moreover."

"What more?" By this time all the men were listening with evident interest and concern.

"Ta gayger," continued Donald, "will be have more nor was good for him o' ta whusky, and when he'll come to ta door he'll tak ta widow round ta neck an' he'll say, 'Noo, mishtriss, they'll be some shentlemans here ta night, an' ye maun be cheevil tae them and gie them, a drap o' yer best. They'll be affen fashed wi' a kin' o' a drooth themshels.'"

The old man's story made no little sensation. Donald himself shot another glance toward the rift between the boulders. The young man half rose from the ground and knocked the ashes out of his pipe; and Archie Graham drew a pistol from his breast, examined the trigger, and laid the weapon by his side. In the young farmer's mind a fresh anxiety arose. Of the two men who had arrived before them at the corrie, one was a stranger to Graham, though he thought he had seen his face before. He was bound in honour toward the others to consider him a friend; but was it not possible they were deceived? Might not the new comer prove a spy or a traitor? So he questioned with himself, but he dared not hint his suspicions.

"We are running risks to-night," said Archibald Graham. "We must set a watch before it be too late. Re-joice, if the gaugers come, we stand by one another till the last hope is gone."

It was too late already. Scarcely had one of the party left to assume the post of sentinel than he returned, breathless, to say that the crown officers were upon them. He had heard the broken tread of many feet among the rough stones. There was no time either to conceal or remove the apparatus of their illicit operations—all they could do was drawn out the fire, and hide themselves among the rocks. A brief period of breathless stillness and suspense followed broken only by the hissing patter of raindrops and the crackle of dying embers. Then came the crisis. Whispering voices above, below; the sharp thud of feet springing blindly from stone to stone; the slipping and scraping of iron-shod boots on the dripping rocks told them they were surrounded. It was evident also that the officers of the Crown had with them a force sufficient to overpower the breakers of the law, however bold and reckless these might prove themselves to be. As if by common instinct the smugglers changed their tactics; they did not wish to be caught like rabbits in a hole. Gathering for a moment from their cramped hiding-places, they emerged in a body from the rocks to a more open space in front. Graham was the last to leave, for he slipped back to grope for his revolver, but it was gone—at least he could not find it. Muttering words we shall not put on record, he joined his confederates. In a moment their enemies were upon them. From the rocks above, from the bed of the stream below, from the crevice between the boulders on either hand, the attacking party sprang upon their prey. It were vain to attempt any picture of the wild scuffle which followed. It is only the truth to say that none even of the parties engaged could recount the rapid fortunes of the fray. After a brief struggle, in which Graham's left arm was severely wounded by a sword cut, he tossed two of his assailants from him to the earth. Broken cries for help from more than one quarter told him that some at least of his confederates were already in the grip of the officers; and the crowd which swarmed around made it equally clear that neither further defence nor any attempt at rescue would be of the least avail. A whispered "Save yourself, Mr.—" from